

VZCZCXYZ0028  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHPE #0667/01 0652009  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 062009Z MAR 07  
FM AMEMBASSY LIMA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4250  
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 4413  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 7236  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0206  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAR QUITO 1051  
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 1144  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS LIMA 000667

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR PE  
SUBJECT: TEACHER'S UNION TAKES IT ON THE CHIN OVER TEST RESULTS

REF: A. LIMA 33  
1B. LIMA 167

Sensitive But Unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

11. (SBU) Summary: Minister of Education Jose Antonio Chang on February 23 announced the results of a nationwide teacher examination held in January: almost 50 percent of public school teachers were unable to answer simple questions about mathematics, and more than 30 percent were functionally illiterate. The radical teacher's union SUTEP (the United Syndicate of Educational Workers) initially questioned the results, but in the face of overwhelming public criticism, issued an apology for the same. The mea culpa handed the Garcia administration a decisive win in an ongoing struggle to implement a meaningful program of educational reform. End Summary.

12. (U) Minister Change announced on February 23 that more than 192,000 public school teachers had undergone standardized testing in January. Forty-seven percent of those tested were unable to solve simple math equations, and 33 percent were unable to read at a basic level. Less than two percent were able to pass all three levels of the test in both reading and mathematics. Primary school teachers and those working in rural areas received the lowest scores. Chang called the results "immoral."

13. (U) In response, SUTEP came out swinging: Secretary General Caridad Montes said the government had administered the tests unfairly, and she threatened to follow through with plans for a nationwide strike to disrupt the opening of school March 1. Montes' remarks echoed a February 5 interview she held with Poloff, in which she blamed the government for failing to fund schools properly and accused Chang of using the exam as a pretext for firing teachers and destroying the union. She claimed SUTEP represented nearly all of Peru's public school teachers, a claim most analysts consider widely inflated. Montes spent January and February blasting the administration's reform plans in the press and accusing President Garcia of "fascist tendencies." Peru's largest union, the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP), came out in support of SUTEP, but most unions elected to remain on the sidelines, and even CGTP support was tepid.

14. (U) A survey by the University of Lima in February showed 63 percent of those polled disapproved of SUTEP, and an equal percentage blamed teachers for the poor state of Peruvian education; in contrast, the GOP's education policies received a 59 percent approval rating. The Lima press had a field day mocking SUTEP. In the words of one editorialist, SUTEP was

the first teacher's union whose members could neither read nor add. On February 27, SUTEP ran up the white flag. Olmedo Auris, a senior SUTEP official, publicly apologized to parents of school children for the poor test results and said that his union had canceled plans for a strike. Auris admitted that SUTEP had misjudged the depth of frustration over public education, and he offered to begin a dialogue with the government to "commit to improve the quality of education" in Peru.

¶ 15. (U) Chang insisted that the reform process would move forward. The Ministry of Education has presented a bill to Congress defining teachers as essential public employees, thus legally banning them from striking. The bill has gathered support in the Peruvian Congress and has already been approved in committee. Chang said the educational system had failed students for 30 years, and he had no plans to meet with SUTEP. (Comment: Chang canceled a February 22 meeting with Embassy officials. Ministry contacts said he did not want to meet with the Embassy during a high-profile conflict with a left-wing union. End Comment) Chang offered training to those who had failed the exam, but he warned that those who failed three times would be fired.

¶ 16. (SBU) Comment: SUTEP Secretary General Caridad Montes badly misjudged public frustration with public education in general and with SUTEP in particular, much of it left over after a violent strike in 2003 that caused school to be suspended for six weeks. One obvious indication of unhappiness is the fact that 15 percent of Peruvian school children, mostly from the middle and upper classes, attend private schools. Senior SUTEP officials are committed to a Communist vision of society that leaves no room for political

pluralism, and the administration could not have moved forward with plans for educational reform had it acquiesced to SUTEP's demands to end testing (see reftels for an analysis of other issues related to education reform). The administration calculated correctly that SUTEP had few friends, even within organized labor, and relied on Garcia's popularity and his bully pulpit to counter claims of union bashing with demands for quality education for all of Peru's children, especially the poor. For the moment, the GOP can claim a political victory that has not only bolstered the President's popularity but also set the stage for a much needed overhaul of a highly politicized union and an outdated educational system. End Comment.

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